

The Impact of Life Coaching Sessions on the Behavior of Future Romanian Entrepreneurs - Pilot Study

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Abstract

The aim of this pilot study is to analyze the impact of life coaching sessions on the behavior of future entrepreneurs from Romania.

We conducted a qualitative research to which we applied a focus group, followed by a series of life coaching sessions.

Life coaching sessions helped the young Romanian entrepreneurs to alter their behavior in the sense that they gained confidence in themselves and took steps towards starting a business.

This study has the ambition of being a relevant contribution to this field, given that no such study has been conducted in Romania. The study sheds light on the way in which life coaching can alter the behavior of future entrepreneurs, helping them to better establish and attain business objectives.

Key words: entrepreneurs, life coaching, focus groups, young people, business

J.E.L. classification: I25, J24, J28, L21, L26, L29, M13

1. Introduction – life coaching

Life coaching targets both the individual’s autonomy and the increase of his or her well-being, in order to allow both the personal and the professional development of the individual (Angel et al., 2008). Another way to put it is that, through life coaching sessions, people learn to overcome the limitations or the barriers that come up, over the years, in either their personal or professional life, with the help of a life coaching specialist called life coach. This life coach guides people to look towards their future by means of the objectives they lay down for themselves and of the actions they choose to perform in order to achieve what they set out to do. In our case, the people in question are the future entrepreneurs, who need a certain degree of guidance with regard to their professional life.

2. Entrepreneurs and life coaching sessions

As far as entrepreneurs are concerned, they act in an uncertain present (Kalantaridis, 2004), which means that their actions are directed towards the future (Mises, 1998), with an outcome that is always uncertain (Idem). This is why entrepreneurs need a life coach to support them in their own lives and to help them move forward and get where they want to be. Nevertheless, we must not forget that there are always risks involved and that entrepreneurs should never act randomly. With the help of a life coach, they can learn to manage risk, as Gordon (2012) puts it, in such a way that an occasional failure will not throw them off the track for ever.

We note that Gunning (1997) suggested three features of entrepreneurial action. The first feature involves the assessment of the available means, the second refers to the decision for a course of action and the third deals with the fact that any decision may result in failure because of the difficulty in predicting the way others will react – since any action refers to an unknown future, as Mises (1998) points out. Life coaching sessions can help entrepreneurs visualise the future and

anticipate the way the market will react to their product or service, using the tools and scenarios built together with the life coach; these sessions can also assist entrepreneurs in establishing a concrete plan of action.

An interesting point is made by Ireland and Sirmon (2003), who claim that the new entrepreneur-driven companies are much more effective than the large corporations when it comes to identifying opportunities. This is, in part, due to the fact that these small companies are at the beginning of their life and they have a great appetite for new opportunities. This is all the more true given Gordon's (2012) assertion that opportunities abound amidst the turbulences caused by economic changes and dislocations. This means that, before an entrepreneur sets out to formalise their business, they need to design a concept, test it and check how it performs on the market. Therefore, testing the business concept is the first step in ensuring that the concept is feasible (Allen, 2002), especially considering that a feasibility analysis determines the entrepreneur to look upon opening a new business from a critical perspective.

3. Methodology

The aim of this pilot study is to analyze the impact of life coaching sessions on the behaviour of future entrepreneurs from Romania.

First, through a webinar subjects were helped to familiarise themselves with the concept of life coaching, as they had not heard about this approach before, nor had they participated in such sessions.

They were explained the reason why they were at that meeting and were told that, in the event that they did not want to participate in the focus group or in the life coaching sessions, they were free to quit at any time, without incurring any consequences.

In the months of October of 2016 – February 2017, we conducted a qualitative study using a 1-hour online focus group session with a group of young people interested in entrepreneurship, aged 21-35. We wanted to learn what they were planning to do from a professional standpoint in the near future – more specifically, if they were interested in starting their own business.

Using Google Adwords, the prospective subjects were invited in October 2016 to participate in a focus group followed by a series of life coaching sessions.

Following our announcement, seven subjects accepted our invitation and willingly participated in the meeting.

Of these seven participants, five claimed they wanted to start their own business, while two said they were not interested in starting a business, because they did not picture themselves as business owners, preferring to be employees. These two were removed from the focus group, since they did not belong to our target group.

The conversation went naturally and there were only a few times when the moderator was compelled to intervene in order to prevent the debate of topics that were of no interest to the study. During the interview, the conversation was guided in such a way as to determine the participation of all the members of the focus group. The discussion was centered around the following questions: Are you interested in starting a business? What type of business would you like to start? What services do you plan on providing? What is the target market for your business? What do you estimate the needs of your customers are? What are the resources required to start a business?

The survey effectively increased the subjects' entrepreneurial appetite, so each of them subsequently participated in a 40-minute life coaching session. In order to help them gain a better understanding of their career options, we asked the subjects to set a short-term working objective that they particularly want to achieve for their business.

The five young entrepreneurs chose the following objectives:

- (1) "I want to start an online business in the field of tourist services."
- (2) "In the following period, I want to start a retail business with my friend."
- (3) "I want to lay the foundation of an IT business."
- (4) "In the following period, I want to start a family business that will generate monthly income in excess of RON 10,000."
- (5) "Next summer, I want to start an online apparel business by building a website and contacting suppliers needed for me to secure my stock of merchandise."

During the life coaching sessions, we worked with each subject to help them clarify their objective as specifically as possible, so that it may become tangible. Using small steps with each subject, we guided them to define the objective and to build a clear vision of what they intend to achieve in life.

For each of the five subjects was allocated 10 minutes to define their objective in writing and to discuss it, then another 10 minutes to set, with our support, a plan of action containing the specific steps necessary to achieve their objective. Another 10 minutes were allocated to further discussing and clarifying the working objective. The last 10 minutes were allocated for feed-back and feed-forward.

After completing the first life coaching session, the interviewer informed each subject that they could choose to participate in further sessions if they wanted to obtain results from life coaching.

Thus, two more sessions followed, which included the monitoring and the assessment of the subjects, especially given that commitment and persistence in action are the basic processes in effecting real change (Prochaska et al., 1992, and Peterson, 1996). Thus, this is about more than just setting a plan of action with the individual – it is about the life coach's endeavor to motivate the individual to act towards attaining his or her objectives.

While the subjects received the life coaching sessions free of charge, all of them stated that this was not the reason why they chose to continue the sessions. The young entrepreneurs returned to the life coaching sessions voluntarily, because they felt motivated to do so. They wanted to be supported and encouraged to start a business by an experienced professional; also, they wanted to achieve things that made a difference both for themselves, by generating personal well-being, reputation and social status, and for the ones around them, by creating jobs that would benefit others and by getting involved in their community through various corporate social responsibility actions.

4. Results

From November 2016 to early February 2017, we worked together with the five subjects towards attaining their working objective. The initial life coaching session was followed by an additional two one-on-one sessions: the first was held in early November 2016, to do extra work on the objective, and the last was held in early February, to assess the subjects' results and to provide them with feedback and feedforward. The sessions were agreed upon with the subjects.

The breaks between the sessions allowed the subjects time to reflect upon what they wanted to achieve in the future and to decide whether they would pursue the road they had chosen. Throughout the duration of the study, subjects were monitored and assessed to analyze the direction they chose as far as their professional path was concerned.

Please note that, in the initial stage, the subjects' ideas are a mere starting point. Getting to an actual, working business requires a complex process of filtering and selection. Of the five subjects, four built a website and managed to file their documents with the Trade Register in order to start a business, while one subject needs more time because he does not have sufficient funds to start a business, but he fully intends to get the necessary funding to become an entrepreneur.

5. Findings

The main finding is that these life coaching sessions helped the young entrepreneurs to alter their behavior in the sense that they gained confidence in themselves and took steps towards starting a business. The fact that most of the subjects ended up starting a business indicates that they are willing to take chances.

As Gordon (2012) claims, it is very easy for us, human beings, to become confused about life, because we often get entangled in a variety of objectives; in the absence of some clear, concrete and specific objectives, entrepreneurs will achieve nothing in life.

In our case, we note that the participating subjects felt motivated to define a concrete working objective and to set the necessary activities and steps so that they may reach the intended result. Furthermore, the young entrepreneurs felt compelled to continue to attend the life coaching sessions even after the initial one, which means that they had a clear motivation: to build the life

they wanted for themselves and to provide their own material and social comfort. This determined them to obtain tangible results following these sessions. We can say that their success was influenced by the life coach: if the life coach inspires confidence and empathy to the people around him and radiates a positive energy that helps them overcome obstacles, then those people will be motivated to continue with the life coaching in order to fulfil their dream.

We should point out the fact that, in Romania – and elsewhere, for that matter –, young people starting businesses is a welcome infusion in the market, because young entrepreneurs, through their energy, ambition and creativity, generate new jobs and help increase the local standard of living by paying taxes. Moreover, as Kirzner (1982) puts it, through their entrepreneurial activity, they support the market's process of mutual discovery by paying constant attention to the opportunities of turning a profit.

The study concluded that all five young people wanted to become entrepreneurs and to start an online business, which goes to show that young people are aware of the importance of digital in the business environment and are up-to-date with the latest developments. On the one hand, as Mises (1998) states, any person is an entrepreneur, because any uncertainty of the future is involved into action. Moreover, as Gordon (2012) puts it, entrepreneurs turn ideas into reality through their own qualities, skills and ambition – traits that can be learnt and developed, for entrepreneurs are not born, but made.

On the other hand, Allen (2002) claims that entrepreneurs need to have a clear understanding of the type of business they want – there are too many entrepreneurs who can barely articulate a definition of their business because they are ignorant of market trends or changes in the economy. But we can argue that this is but an excuse for entrepreneurs' failure to build a functional business. They need to thoroughly research and analyze consumer trends and to deploy market research to assess what customer needs are being neglected by the competition, so that they may take them and turn them into business opportunities.

With regard to objectives, we found that, while the subjects initially failed to set SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable and time-based), following our step-by-step discussions with each of them, they ended up with a clear definition of where they wanted to get and of the result they wanted to achieve.

Thus, while the initial objectives set by the subjects were vague, they gradually turned into concrete objectives, as one can clearly see in the table no. 1, entitled "Vague Objectives vs. SMART Objectives set by future entrepreneurs".

Table no. 1 Vague Objectives vs. SMART Objectives set by future entrepreneurs

Vague Objectives	SMART Objectives
"I want to start an online business in the field of tourist services."	"As of this day, 23 November 2016, I want to start an online business on my own, in the field of tourist services, by building a booking website targeted to the niche of people who are interested in going on cruises on the Mediterranean and who have average to high income."
"In the following period, I want to start a retail business with my friend."	"In the period 24-30 November 2016, I want to launch an e-commerce website that retails electronics and home appliances, in partnership with my friend, by contacting suppliers in Romania and in China."
"I want to lay the foundation of an IT business."	"As of 24 November 2016, I want to start a business that involves designing consumer games for Android phones."
"In the following period, I want to start a family business that will generate monthly income in excess of RON 10,000."	"As of 25 November 2016, I intend to launch, together with my family (my husband, my sister and my sister-in-law), a website specialised in wedding planning that will generate a monthly income in excess of RON 10,000, by contacting suppliers for building the website and creating the materials needed to promote the business."

"Next summer, I want to start an online apparel business by building a website and contacting suppliers needed for me to secure my stock of merchandise."	"As of 15 July, I want to start an online apparel business (skirts, trousers and jackets) for businesswomen, by building a website and by contacting suppliers in Romania in order to secure a stock of 210 pieces of clothing every year."
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Source: The Author

In table no. 1 Vague Objectives vs. SMART Objectives set by future entrepreneurs is indicative of the young people's strong motivation to really develop their business idea and to implement it by means of a SMART working objective. We note that the objectives serve to reinforce the business idea and to shape the entrepreneur's vision of the way in which his or her business will look in the future. As one can clearly see – and as Zeus and Skiffington (2002) point out, too –, life coaching induces deep changes in both one's way of thinking and in one's behavior.

6. Conclusions

Life coaching sessions, as well as setting SMART objectives, helped young people to alter their behaviour in the sense that they chose to start new businesses. Moreover, these sessions guided subjects towards achieving a clearer vision of what they really wanted, which is all the more relevant given the fact that, after they set their objectives, entrepreneurs are supposed to design strategies to attain those objectives. As Gordon (2012) puts it, entrepreneurship is a personal journey in which entrepreneurs are more likely to be successful if they manage to understand themselves as human beings and to understand their objectives and the obstacles they may face. This is particularly true because, as Whitmore (2014) claims, life coaching sessions aim at achieving top performance by attitudinal, behavioral or organisational changes.

We also note that young people began to quickly adapt to the new trends in management and to realise the importance of attending life coaching sessions. While they begin by participating out of sheer curiosity, they gradually understand that these sessions are very useful, helping them to clearly define what they want to do next.

At the same time, these sessions can effect such a radical change in their path in life, that they begin to obtain top results in everything they do, both personally and professionally – especially given that the hardest part is the progression from an idea to the opportunity of creating a feasible business concept (Allen, 2002).

7. Limitations

Of the seven young people who accepted the invitation, five were interested in becoming entrepreneurs, which suggests that there is a positive trend among young people who wish to start a new business. Yet this data cannot be extrapolated, meaning that the study needs to be extended to cover a larger number of young people.

8. Originality/value

This pilot study has the ambition of being a relevant contribution to this field, given that no such study has been conducted in Romania. The study sheds light on the way in which life coaching can alter the behaviour of future entrepreneurs, helping them to better establish and attain business objectives.

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