

# Power from within: a coaching approach to social work

Coach and registered social worker, **Dr Suzanne Triggs**, argues that personal power is fundamental to coaching those in socially adverse circumstances.

The April 2021 issue of *Coaching Today* introduced our new coaching for social impact special interest group (SIG), in which we also launched our new journal series dedicated to exploring themes and ideas emerging from the group. We are pleased to offer up here an article by independent coach, trainer, registered social worker and SIG member, Dr Suzanne Triggs, on how using coaching skills in social work practice affects and transforms traditional power dynamics, leading to significant social change.

It is no understatement to describe Dr Triggs as a passionate, driven, optimistic and energetic practitioner, trainer and trailblazer in this work. Her doctoral research findings and continuing work in this area document the empowering and transformational effect of social workers' use of coaching skills, observing the rapid and considerable changes in the attitude, voices and actions of service users and their relationships with social workers. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Suzanne has trained and coached over 200 social workers online, gathering substantial evidence of coaching's potential for positive social impact on communities when individuals are encouraged to recognise and act on their personal power.

## Val Watson

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**V**iktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959)<sup>1</sup> and more recently, *The Choice*, by Edith Eger (2017)<sup>2</sup> are two devastating yet life-affirming personal accounts of survival during the Holocaust. Both books emphasise our personal power: the power to positively choose our response and transcend our circumstances, however bleak and hopeless. Since before, and during, the pandemic, I have been introducing these classic texts – through a coaching lens – to a whole new audience: social workers.

Social workers work with people who do not fit the mould of 'typical' coaching clients: ie people who are more likely to be experiencing social disadvantage and deprivation. One concern about coaching raised in the field of social work is that the coaching process does not attempt to look beyond a narrow individualist perspective, to '...see the social in the individual and the individual in the social'.<sup>3</sup> Rather, coaching's emphasis is seen to be on the individual's capacity for isolated self-understanding, individual agency and mastery over individual circumstances. Arguably, coaching may fail to acknowledge that what coachees might present as individual problems are in fact social problems, produced as a consequence of their relationship with the adverse social structures in which they are immersed.<sup>4</sup> For me, the concept of personal power, advocated by Frankl and Eger, is fundamental here, and is essential to a coaching approach, which is useful for social workers to innovate their practice.

## Social power versus personal power

Power is often conceptualised narrowly as relating to the dominance and unequal control of the behaviour of others or of valued resources. This is the construct of social power; those who possess it hold a disproportionate influence over the states of others and their access to the things they need. These can be tangible items, such as money, food and housing, or less concrete assets, like recognition, attention or status.<sup>5</sup> The depleting effects of feelings of powerlessness have been described by social psychologist Dacher Keltner as compromising '...our ability to reason, to reflect, to engage in the world, and to feel good and hopeful about the future'.<sup>6</sup> It can result in 'goal neglect': the failure to stay focused on performing a necessary task.<sup>7</sup> Research also suggests that it produces a social anxiety that interferes with our ability to mentalise and see the perspectives of others.<sup>8</sup> At a non-conscious level, feelings of powerlessness can be triggered by a plethora of non-verbal power cues, such as vocal pitch and the rate of speech and interruptions.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, it affects our ability to process, act upon and listen to what others are saying to us, an important factor in the often anxiety-provoking and power-skewed encounters between social workers and service users.

According to Harvard social psychologist Amy Cuddy, personal power is different to social power in that it cannot be rationed or capped, and we do not need to control or compete with others to hold on to it:

'Personal power is characterised by freedom from the dominance of others. It is infinite as opposed to zero-sum – it's about access to control of limitless inner resources, such as our skills and abilities, our deeply held values, our true personalities, our boldest selves!'<sup>5</sup>

Having personal power does not mean we can control all the outcomes in our lives, as these are mostly subject to variables outside of our control,

## Growing people's personal power is key to helping them find ways forward and is the foundation of coaching for social change

and activating personal power through coaching cannot address an absence of social, economic and structural power or increase access to material resources. However, having a sense of our personal power can have a transformative effect on our individual psychology in terms of how we think, feel and act.<sup>10</sup>

An optimistic body of studies has shown that people moving out of situations or relationships in which elevated power was activated conceptually can feel more hopeful about their future, engage more readily in action and exhibit behaviours that move them towards new situations<sup>11</sup> rather than feeling threatened or inhibited by them: 'Power makes us approach. Powerlessness makes us avoid (p. 112)'.<sup>5</sup> Priming feelings of increased personal power in a specific instance can also continue to have positive consequences outside of it and have a far-reaching influence that people are equally unaware of in new situations.<sup>9</sup> The opportunity to experience personal power means we are therefore more likely to achieve social power through our increased confidence in ourselves.

### Transferring power

Asking anybody to change the way they have always behaved and to relinquish some of their positional authority is challenging. For my recent doctoral thesis, the first empirical research globally to utilise coaching in children's social work, I asked social workers to do just that. They were required to train as coaches and to deliver coaching to parents and young people in the social work child protection system. The egalitarian practitioner stance inherent in coaching required the social workers to step away from the authority and social power associated with their social work roles, and to activate a hypothetical personal power in service users through a coaching relationship.

In practice, this meant that the social workers had to make a conscious choice to sacrifice status and control and to reduce behavioural habits that

denote power, such as leading the agenda, dominating the conversation, prescriptive fixing, enforcing change and defining outcomes. This meant intentionally priming the mindsets of service users by enabling them to experience elevated personal power as they determined and visualised their goals, which for once, they were responsible for setting themselves.

### A different dynamic

In my research, the felt experience of being coached as opposed to being 'social worked' resulted in service users muting their historical antipathy towards social workers. This was an unexpected and surprising outcome – I had not foreseen that coaching had the potential to temporarily offset the negative consequences of powerlessness experienced in social work relationships. Service users talked about being spoken to in a different 'tone' during coaching, being allowed '...to talk about what I want to talk about' and the coach having a different 'attitude' and 'stance'. These seemingly subtle cues and changes in communication prompted a sense of agency and choice in people, which disrupted old, stagnant behaviour patterns. Being engaged differently in a co-constructive coaching relationship activated people's personal power and moved them to achieve small, but transformative changes in a short space of time.

### Power to transform

My published research is part of a growing body of evidence that suggests the societal benefits of coaching in the social and public spheres.<sup>12</sup> For me, it has confirmed the idea that coaching and social work can sit side by side in an enabling empowerment paradigm if social workers can learn to stop holding power close and have the confidence to give it away. The pandemic has exacerbated societal disparities and pushed many into poverty and further hardship, eroding feelings of control. Growing people's personal power is key to helping them find ways forward and is the foundation of coaching for social change. ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr Suzanne Triggs** spent the first 20 years of her career working in children's social work in the UK, as a front-line worker, trainer and lecturer. Since training as a coach, Suzanne has made it her mission to connect the fields of coaching and social work. She runs a private coaching practice and trains social workers in coaching skills. She has recently received the Institute of Coaching and Harvard Medical School's inaugural 'Coaching for the Social Good' award in recognition of the positive impact of her work on democratising coaching. [www.coachdoctor.org](http://www.coachdoctor.org)

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