

# Working with core qualities in coaching

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**In this paper we examine the concept of psychological capital and the importance of *core qualities*. We will describe several methods for helping someone to become more aware of their core qualities. Psychologists have shown the importance of using core qualities for growth. A coach can encourage their coachees to do so. As we will see, people's core qualities are closely linked to their personal ideals. Finally, we will consider how imagination can be helpful in discovering core qualities.**

*It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness*

Lao Tse

## 1. Psychological capital

When people have confidence in their own potential, they will feel more empowered and their actions will become more effective. Because of this, developing this confidence is viewed as an essential part of one's psychological capital. Personal qualities constitute an important source of this confidence. Below we will take a deeper look at such qualities and clarify how they are different from competencies. We will also consider how a coach can help coachees to become more aware of these qualities and support them in building on them.

### *Example 1: Getting things moving*

Martin is a new project officer at a long established organization. He was excited about this change in work environment, but before long he realizes everyone there is expected to use established ways of working and follow rigid procedures. This makes Martin feel constrained and he comes to view his new workplace as outdated. Because he is a creative person, he has a lot of ideas on what the company could do to better deal with contemporary issues, such as how to become more sustainable. These ideas energize Martin, because he wants to contribute to society. However, he thinks his colleagues would not appreciate it if he caused a commotion, and he wants to be careful at this new job.

After two weeks, he manages to find two colleagues who appreciate his ideas and would also like to see some change. Together the three of them develop a plan for a new project. Martin is happy to have something to use his creativity on, and feels relieved to finally be making some change.

In Example 1 we can see that Martin combines several personal qualities. Not only is he creative and enthusiastic, but he is also sensitive: he is very aware of his colleague's thoughts and feelings. Because of this, he can adapt his behavior to his work environment. This is another one of his qualities. His qualities help him find the two colleagues who want to collaborate with him on a new project. Martin works hard on their shared project, which shows that goal-directedness is also one of his qualities.

## 2. Core qualities

Martin uses several personal qualities that together have an important effect on his environment, and in this way he experiences his inner strength. In the field of positive psychology, such qualities are called *character strengths*. Following Ofman (2000), we prefer the term *core qualities*. Core

qualities are part of what is called one's *psychological capital*. A helpful metaphor for this is *the inner diamond*, a term used by Almas (2004). In this metaphor, core qualities are the facets of the inner diamond (as shown in Figure 1). Everyone has many such aspects: various qualities which are characteristic for a person.

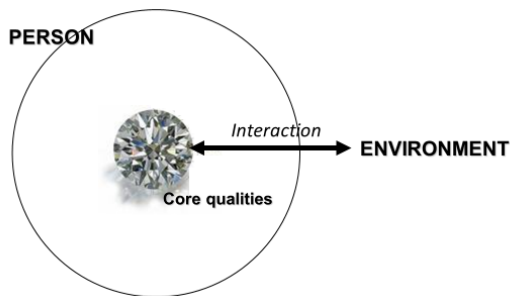


Figure 1: Core qualities as aspects of the inner diamond, and the interaction with the environment.

It is important that core qualities receive attention throughout one's life, as this promotes their development. For example, a teacher or parent might recognize a child's core qualities, and support their growth. This growth is enhanced when core qualities are actively and consciously used: practice makes perfect.

Exercise 1 is aimed at helping the reader to connect the theme of core qualities with their own experience. This exercise is also well suited for use in coaching (sessions), as it helps coachees to become more aware of their own core qualities.

#### *Exercise 1: Contrast analysis*

- Think back to an inspiring experience you had, where you interacted with one or more others. It can be an experience from your professional or private life. Try to mentally put yourself in that situation again.
  - What were you doing? Pay special attention to the 'how' of what you were doing.
  - What were you thinking?
  - How did the situation make you feel?
  - Apparently something of value to you manifested in this situation. What exactly was it?
  - Which of your core qualities played an important role in this situation?
- Now, think back to a tough or difficult situation, perhaps even one in which you felt stuck.
  - What made this situation so difficult?
  - What happened inside you?
  - What were you thinking?
  - How did you feel?
  - Apparently you wanted something in this situation (or thought something was important) that did not happen. What was it? Does this concern one of your personal values?
- What is the difference between the core quality/qualities you used in the first situation compared to the second one?
- If you look back at your positive experience, can you find a core quality you could have used (more) in the second situation?

### *The conscious use of core qualities*

Sylvia is a young woman who did this exercise. She is a supervisor at a large company, and she often struggles to motivate her colleagues. For her first (inspiring) experience, she picked a meeting where she was presenting a product she really believed in. The whole team got excited, and they quickly started thinking about how to best bring the product to market. In her reflection on this experience with the use of Exercise 1, Sylvia realized that she thinks it is important for the whole team to be on the same page. She also discovered that her qualities of connectedness to the team and having vision and ambition played a major role in this situation. This helped to raise her confidence.

For her second experience, Sylvia chose a coaching session with team member Harry, about whom she had received a complaint from a customer. This session was a negative experience for Sylvia, because Harry did not seem to take any responsibility for his actions. To Sylvia, this made it seem like he was also ignoring all solutions to the problem, which she found disappointing. Altogether, the conversation felt useless. By working through Exercise 1, she realized that she had deviated from her personal strengths in this situation. All the qualities she discovered in the first situation seemed to have suddenly disappeared in the second case. During their conversation, she did not establish a real connection between her and Harry, and she did not share her positive vision about ways in which Harry could improve his interactions with customers.

The example of Sylvia is typical of what happens to most people when they work through Exercise 1. The exercise makes them aware of how they are sometimes using their core qualities and how this impacts a situation in a positive way, and what can happen when they do not use these core qualities. Often, people believe that they cannot influence this process, as if inspiring situations just happen by chance. However, a fundamental idea from positive psychology is that you can always access your core qualities. They are a fundamental part of who you are, so you can always use them! Having this realization, becoming more aware of your core qualities and using them to achieve your goals is an important developmental step, as this will help you to influence situations and gain more self-confidence. Therefore, it is an important part of core reflection coaching.

### *Discovering core qualities*

Many people find it easier to recognize core qualities in others than in themselves. Focusing on the strength of others can therefore be a good intermediate step to become more familiar with the field of core qualities. The following exercise focuses on this idea.

#### *Exercise 2: An important person*

Think back to someone in your life who had a positive impact on you, for example someone from whom you have learned a lot or someone who has inspired you. This could be, for example, one of your parents, a teacher, a mentor, or a coach.

Imagine that you are together with that person right now. (It may help to close your eyes for a while and visualize the person you chose, as if that person is now really here.)

Write down an important core quality of this person.

Core qualities that people wrote down as a result of this exercise are: enthusiastic, committed, honest, courageous, passionate, optimistic, empathetic, and many more. Below, we will mention some more examples of core qualities.

### *Examples of core qualities*

Caring, creative, spontaneous, adventurous, energetic, patient, independent, modest, committed, flexible, self-sufficient, visionary, industrious, sporty, responsible, loving, assertive, consistent, goal-oriented, analytical, sensitive, good-humoured, orderly, precise, sensitive, calm, structured, helpful, involved, full of initiative, enterprising, practical, careful, connecting, respectful, musical, confident, determined, thoughtful, ...

Such a list of core qualities is infinite. Every time you take a close look at someone, and especially when you pay attention to how it *feels* to connect with that person, you discover a new core quality. It is fascinating to view people in this way, and especially as a coach to look at your coachees with this perspective. Ultimately, of course, everyone can learn to look at themselves in this way. This is an essential point of attention in core reflection coaching. Basic questions underlying core reflection coaching are: what are the core qualities and talents of coachees and how can they consciously use and develop their qualities to help them reach their goals and ideals?

### *Talents versus core qualities*

We view *a talent* as a core quality that is strongly present within a person. In most cases a talent is further developed through rigorous training. Think, for example, of lessons and rehearsals for further developing one's musical talent or training and competition to hone one's sporty talent. In our view, a one-sided focus on talent can be detrimental to a broader, holistic view on personal development. After all, everyone possesses a wealth of core qualities. With the right attention, even the less developed core qualities can become strong and beautiful aspects of one's psychological capital. For this reason, we will focus on the theme of 'core qualities' rather than looking at one's 'talents'. We think it is important for everyone to discover and use a wide array of their core qualities.

### *Developing core qualities*

Parents and teachers can play an important role in promoting a child's core qualities. Someone who is raised in a family which values ambition, will be more likely to become goal-oriented and ambitious. Significant life events or one's living conditions can also bring out certain core qualities. A child losing his mother at a young age might, for example, take up the care for the younger children and develop the quality of care. People who have to do everything on their own, will be more likely to develop the core quality of autonomy than people in different circumstances. In short, specific core qualities can become strong within someone as a result of their upbringing, education, or specific (external) circumstances. We can view this as the process of polishing the inner diamond.

Martin (from Example 1) went to a school which strongly promoted his creativity. And because he was raised in a large family, he quickly developed sensitivity for the people around him.

In any stage of life, it is possible to develop a core quality that was previously not as strong. That core quality might however not become as strong as it would have been if it had been promoted from a young age. In such a case it is useful to have a person actively pay attention to the use of this core quality. For example, you often see people strengthening previously underdeveloped qualities at a later age, when they start painting, making music, or volunteering for people in need. Core qualities will become weaker over time if they never receive attention or are never called on, but they always remain present within a person as a hidden potential.

### 3. Mapping one's core qualities

In order to help coachees use their core qualities, they first have to be aware of them. In practice, many people are not aware of their own core qualities or view them as universal ('isn't it normal to be careful for others?'). Nevertheless, it is important for everyone to know their core qualities, to feel the power of these qualities, and to consciously apply them in their work or private life. This way, they will achieve more and their sense of well-being will grow. There are many ways of promoting awareness of core qualities, either when working with coachees or for your own development as a coach. We will now outline seven approaches.

#### *Approach 1: Paying attention to one's own personal core qualities, possibly with the help of others*

Anyone can start thinking about their own core qualities by examining what they are good at and what gives them energy. It is also possible to ask others for feedback on one's core qualities, either in a work or private environment.

#### *Exercise 3: Awareness of one's core qualities*

Write down five of your core qualities. If that is difficult for you, then ask people in your environment for feedback on your (core) qualities.

Next, here are a few questions you can answer:

1. How often do you *consciously* use these core qualities?
2. Is it possible to use them more often?
3. In what sort of situations?
4. What would the benefits be? For whom?

Coaches play an important role in making coachees aware of their core qualities and opportunities for using them, as shown in Example 2.

#### *Example 2: Taking care for oneself*

A coachee spends a lot of energy caring for her colleagues. She often helps out when people are suddenly sick and she is always ready to take on the difficult tasks. Everybody knows they can come to her when things aren't going well. However, she gets exhausted from work and she doesn't really feel appreciated for her efforts. Her coach first acknowledges her hard work and mentions her quality of care. Next, the coach helps her to bring more balance to her work and to start working in a way that is less exhausting to her. This way the coachee learns to apply the quality of care to herself.

#### *Approach 2: Reflecting on successful experiences*

A different approach to locating core qualities, is to look at experiences where the coachee (or you yourself) were at your best, a situation where that person really flourished. When doing this, it is not uncommon for thoughts to arise along the lines of: 'I used to have that quality, but I don't have it anymore'. However, in reality you can never truly lose a core quality! However, it is possible to spend little to no attention on a core quality or to 'cover it' with obstacles you create yourself. Thinking back to inspiring and successful experiences can thus help to overcome these obstacles and strengthen awareness of one's core qualities.

Sometimes, successful experiences from a very different context can be used. For example, a positive experience from working on a hobby might expose core qualities that can also be used in a professional context. This idea is illustrated in Example 3.

*Example 3: A soccer player in teacher education*

Jack is a student in teacher education. He barely gets around to studying and his pile of unfinished work keeps getting bigger. He feels weak, powerless, and guilty. His coach discovers that Jack plays soccer at the highest amateur level. They talk about what kind of player Jack is. Here, many core qualities come to light: Jack is enthusiastic, has a clear overview of what is going on, is fast, present everywhere and a real go-getter. When talking about this, Jack seems like a different man, someone who is very passionate and enjoys working hard.

Jack and his coach also talk about how Jack fought his way back into the top team after suffering a persistent injury: with a lot of self-directedness, willpower, and passion. His coach then asks where all these qualities are when Jack sits down to study (often too late). Jack looks at his coach with confusion, as he had never looked at it this way. He never combined these areas of his life before.

The conversation then turns to how Jack can and wants to use the qualities he uses as a soccer player to help him study. This perspective is a relief to Jack. For once he is looking forward to Friday, the day he usually spends studying. A few weeks later, he has almost caught up with his study work and he is 'studying like a soccer player'. Jack needed little follow up; he knew exactly how he wanted to study. After all, he had spent a year at the soccer club to get where he wanted to be: a place in the roster of the top team, that was his ideal. Now he wants a spot in the roster of teachers!

(Our thanks go to Tiemen Zijlstra for submitting this example from his practice.)

Core qualities can also be found by looking back on a difficult situation or time that you have overcome. In that case, the question is: which core qualities helped you to get through this difficult phase? This way, overcoming a problematic situation or time is used as a positive experience.

*Approach 3: Considering personal contributions/investments*

By recognizing one's own contribution to a situation, core qualities can become visible, which can then be deliberately used in other situations.

*Example 4: A quiet student*

A quiet student feels insecure about her position among her class mates. She feels unimportant and finds it difficult to take initiative. A teacher coaches her and tries to help her discover what core qualities she uses in the classroom. Her core quality of modesty leads to her speaking with a quiet voice, which keeps the classroom calm. Her open attitude makes her wait and offer opportunities for others. That also shows her core quality of respect for others. After considering this together, the coach explores what contribution the student makes at home. What core qualities does she apply there, for her parents, her sister?

This principle can also be used with adults. When exploring one's contributions, they might be found in the present (for example in the current work environment) or in the past (such as in the family of origin).

*Approach 4: Reflecting on inspiring examples*

Yet another approach is to look at the core qualities of someone you admire. This person could be your supervisor, a colleague, someone from television or a book, someone you had a personal encounter with, etcetera. That person's core qualities can be inspirational and it is possible to deliberately call upon those qualities within oneself. We already saw this in Exercise 2.

*Approach 5: Using a role model from one's past*

Positive role models from one's past can (also) be used as a resource for discovering and developing core qualities. Example 5 contains two situations illustrating this idea.

*Example 5: Using role models*

a. A coachee explains that his working environment is very hectic. He wants to learn how to shield himself from that every so often, in order to calmly reflect on his work, but he feels obligated to keep on working. His coach knows from previous sessions that his father is a big source of inspiration to him. The coach asks the coachee how his father handled such a situation at home. How did he take time for himself? The coachee says: 'Dad would always sit down to read the newspaper at a certain time.' The coach then asks the coachee if he would be able to create such a 'newspaper reading' moment for himself. The coachee now feels more entitled to regularly take a moment for reflection in his hectic workplace, and he wants to do that more often. In this situation, his father is used as a resource. The coach now asks which of the coachee's core qualities receive more attention when creating a 'newspaper reading' moment during his day. He then realizes that it is about being calm and having an overview. With the help of his coach, the coachee feels the strength of these qualities within himself.

b. A student in teacher education is encouraged by her coach to reflect on one of her former teachers that she found to be inspiring. She picks such a teacher and becomes aware that he taught his subject with enthusiasm and passion. The student teacher comes to realize that she herself also possesses passion and enthusiasm, and she resolves to use those qualities more often.

It is characteristic for this approach to ask: which of the role model's core qualities can be inspirational for one's own development?

*Approach 6: Reflecting on personal values*

Everyone cherishes personal values, for example values that they got from their upbringing or family and which they feel loyal to. It may also include values developed later in life that are specifically meaningful to a person. For example: respecting others or pushing on when things get tough. In these examples, we can see the core qualities of respect and perseverance. This shows that there are always core qualities associated with personal values. We will now give another example of this principle (Example 6).

*Example 6: The path from values to core qualities*

An employee is very set on her freedom and ability to plan her own work. She was raised that way, and she values this attitude. Her coach asks her which values are characteristic for this attitude, and what core qualities she has developed as a result. The employee becomes more aware of her core quality of autonomy.

#### *Approach 7: filling out a questionnaire*

Awareness of one's core qualities can also be promoted by filling out a questionnaire that brings them to the fore. Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology, has created such a questionnaire with his team, which can be found at [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org).



#### **4. Core qualities and competencies**

In many areas of society, such as business and education, there is a strong emphasis on competencies and less attention on core qualities. How do these two concepts relate to each other? The term competency usually refers to a technical, practical skill, supported by knowledge and an adequate professional attitude. In the example of Martin (Example 1) he had to develop the competency of working within the established structure, using strict procedures at his new job. However, that competency is different from his core qualities of creativity, enthusiasm, and goal-directedness. There are three major differences between competencies and core qualities:

1. *Competencies – viewed as skills – can be split into sub competencies; core qualities are indivisible.*

Competencies can be split into sub competencies. For example: first you do this, then that, and finally you do something else. You might first practice these sub competencies separately, before you learn to combine them. Martin, for example, first has to learn all the procedures at his new job, before he can gradually learn to apply all of them to his work.

Core qualities cannot be split into smaller parts. One cannot, for example, formulate any sub qualities that together make up the core quality of creativity. This is especially clear when looking at core qualities such as enthusiasm or courage. Nevertheless, it is possible to further develop one's core qualities, for instance by first applying them in simple situations and next in more complex contexts.

2. *Competencies can be taught; core qualities are already present within a person.*

Someone can teach Martin how the procedures work and train him to use them. This way the competencies are 'transferred' from one person to another. Conversely, people are born with their core qualities. You can see that even newborn babies have the core quality of perseverance. However, as mentioned in Section 2, one's environment can promote or hinder the development of certain core qualities. We will come back to this topic in Section 11.

3. *Competencies are generally specific to a certain profession, while core qualities are widely applicable.*

In general, competencies are specific to a certain small domain. They are specific to a certain discipline or task. They are also essential to that domain. You can think of the competencies of nurses or pilots for example. In our ever changing society, certain competencies can quickly become irrelevant, while core qualities remain important even under changing conditions. For example, think of core qualities such as creativity, enthusiasm, or precision; people can often use those qualities in many different areas. This is the reason why core qualities are so important: they are versatile and widely applicable.

Both competencies and core qualities are important. Martin (from Example 1) only came to flourish at his new job when he was able to work with the procedures while applying his creativity, enthusiasm, and goal-orientedness. Hence, people's strength lies in the *combination of core qualities and competencies*. A coach might, for example, technically be good at asking questions that deepen a conversation, but that competency only becomes strong when combined with core qualities such as real interest in other people and care.



*Exercise 4: Paying attention to core qualities and competencies*

1. Pick a core quality and a competency that you have. For the competency, you can think of an everyday skill such as writing, speaking a foreign language, driving a car, or a specific skill you use for your profession. See if you can recognize the three differences we just mentioned between the core quality and the competency you picked.
2. Is there a connection between the core quality and the competency you chose? For example, does the core quality help you to use the competency? If this connection is not clear to you, can you find a different combination of one of your core qualities and competencies that do have a clear connection?

## **5. The broaden-and-build model**

Awareness of one's core qualities directs attention to one's strengths and evokes positive feelings. This is important, as research in the field of positive psychology shows that a one-sided focus on negative aspects and on what needs to be improved, is not helpful for optimal learning. This is because such a focus evokes negative feelings which in turn will narrow one's thinking, thus hindering growth. Nowadays we know that positive feelings are essential for both personal and professional growth. Fredrickson (2009, 2013) states that in order for growth to take place, one has to have more positive than negative experiences. Positive feelings expand one's perception and thinking, while negative ones limit them and cost energy. Positive feelings ease learning, aid cognitive performance, make people more creative, and support the development of psychological buffers, which in turn increases one's resilience. In this context, Fredrickson talks about the 'broaden-and-build model', as positive emotions broaden one's momentary thought-action repertoire, which helps to build inner resources one can build on. We will return to this topic in Section 11.

In positive psychology, it is argued that traditional psychology focuses too much on trauma, deficiencies, abnormalities, and corresponding treatments. This is a useful insight: a strong focus on what is not going well, is unproductive. This is precisely why giving attention to core qualities is so important. Positive psychologists have shown that core qualities can help to overcome problems if they are actively promoted and addressed. Using one's core qualities makes people more creative and effective.

Since 2000, the field of positive psychology has had a major influence on therapy, coaching, and on various other domains, such as business, health care, and social work. In education there is also a growing awareness that a strong focus on problems is not very effective. Increasingly schools are being convinced that building on students' core qualities or talents is much more effective and forms a better foundation for cognitive development than a focus on shortcomings of students. This has far reaching implications for the teacher's role.

## **6. The role of a coach in the development of core qualities**

In this section, we will discuss the role of the coach in the development of core qualities.

*Example 7: Persistence as an important quality in students*

Teacher Anita is having a discussion with high school seniors Lisa and Devi about a paper they submitted. She comments on a few points regarding the content of the paper. In addition, Anita

devotes a big part of the discussion to the students' learning processes. For example, she asks the students what helped them write the paper.

Lisa: 'Well... at one point we got stuck. We tried to find more information online, but we couldn't really find anything useful. We were in a bit of a slump. Then we went to the library, and there we found a book that really helped us.'

Anita: 'Very good! So what do you think is important when working on an assignment such as writing a paper?'

Devi: 'Uh..., you have to remember that there is always a lot of information to be found on a subject.'

Anita: 'Exactly, and what I thought was even more important: when you got stuck, you did not give up, but you came up with a solution yourself. So you are persistent. That's an important quality to have when you start studying at the university, do you understand?'

Devi: 'Yes, because you will often have a slump during your studies.'

Anita: 'Right, and in those situations it is important that you can rely on your persistence.'

[The students' eyes start to shine.]

Anita: 'How could you use the quality of persistence more often?'

Lisa: 'In math, I tend to quit when I think it's too difficult for me. Maybe I could keep trying for longer.'

Anita: 'What could that bring?'

Lisa: 'Maybe then I will succeed...'

Devi: 'I think it could give you more confidence as well.'

As demonstrated by Example 7, coaches can play an important role in recognizing and naming the core qualities of their coachees. They can encourage their coachees to consciously apply their core qualities, even in situations where the coachee might usually be less inclined to use them.

Coaches that have no experience with recognizing and highlighting core qualities will often try to intellectually deduce which core qualities their coachees have. Sometimes they want to have a list of core qualities for this goal. Such a list can be found in Section 2. Taking note of such a list can be a good start for giving more attention to core qualities. However, rather than relying on such a list, it is important to become sensitive to people's core qualities and to learn to put these qualities into your own words.

We wish to emphasize an important point again: you can recognize someone's core qualities by asking yourself what that person does to you or brings to you, what you *feel* in the interaction, and particularly what *positive* feelings this person evokes within you. This requires 'emotional sensitivity' rather than analytical thinking. It turns out that coaches can quickly develop such sensitivity to core qualities, even if they had not previously given it much attention.

## 7. Flow

### *Example 8: Nadia is in flow*

Nadia is organizing a coaching session for a management team with the goal to improve team collaboration. She has been dreading the meeting; she thought it would be a tough job. While preparing, she decided to start with discussing each other's core qualities and formulating a shared ideal.

The first meeting appears to go well. There are nice moments of interpersonal connection and mutual understanding begins to grow. There is a lot of enthusiasm in this meeting, both among the team members and Nadia. She makes use of what arises in the moment, in a targeted and

creative way. Nadia can feel her own strength and she is enjoying the way things are going. Time flies and it is wonderful to work with a team in this way.

Whenever people let their actions be guided by their core qualities, this evokes a flow of energy, which also influences others in the environment. This can clearly be seen in Example 8 and also in Example 1 (the example with Martin). In Example 7, the two students also start experiencing flow.

*Flow* is characterized by the experience of a positive inner movement. Flow occurs in challenging situations, but only when there is an optimal balance between one's abilities and the challenges posed by the situation. There is a feeling as if everything almost happens by itself. Flow brings energy, which you can recognize by a person's *shining eyes*. Flow is also characterized by being fully present in the here-and-now. When you are in flow, you are attuned to your environment, you almost become one with the situation, and you experience sensitivity to what the situation requires.

## 8. Ideals

There is a close connection between people's core qualities and their personal goals and ideals. We will now take a closer look at this connection.

### *Exercise 5: An inspiring experience*

- a. Recall a recent (work) experience where you felt successful. You could pick the same experience as in Exercise 1, although it can be interesting to choose a new one. Pick a situation that you found to be inspiring, perhaps one where you even experienced flow.
- b. Imagine you are in that situation again. You might want to close your eyes and recall the situation as if you were there now. Take a close look. Also pay attention to what is being said, and in what way.
- c. What do you feel in your body at such a moment? Write down a word that describes a feeling.
- d. What core qualities did you use in this situation?
- e. This situation was probably inspiring to you because it aligned with a personal ideal of yours, something you strive for, long for, or wish to create. What is your ideal in this situation? You could make this more specific in two ways: what is the ideal situation you imagine, and what is your ideal way of being in that situation (How would you behave? How would you feel?).

This exercise shows how your core qualities are strongly related to your ideals. A few examples from other people:

- As a nurse in a hospital, Monica is very committed to people and she cares for her patients. Those core qualities are closely connected to her ideal: making patients feel helped and supported.
- George is a carpenter. He is practical and creative. His ideal is to craft nice furniture that makes people happy.
- Michael is a scientist. He has strong analytical ability and he very curious. His ideal is finding new connections between phenomena in his field.

These examples show how people can use their core qualities for their ideals. The strong connection between core qualities and ideals is no coincidence: people seem to have an inherent desire to bring their core qualities into the world in the most effective way. This leads to (specific) ideals. The

opposite is also true, people often choose ideals which they think to lie within their potential. The process of striving for such an ideal gives meaning to existence.

Often, it is more accurate to not speak of ideals but rather of people's deeper *longing* or *desire*, although those terms might not sound as professional as ideals or goals (which tend to be easier to discuss in our society). Longing and desires are clearly linked with feeling and wanting, whereas goals can seem to be more intellectual constructs. In a deepening relationship between a coach and a coachee, it can be fruitful to examine whether the ideal set forth by a coachee is a manifestation of a deep personal desire, grounded in a core quality of that person. Imagine, for example, a team leader whose ideal is to have more coherence within his team, and who discovers that for this ideal his core quality of commitment to people both drives and helps him.

In conclusion: ideals often refer to the desire to make full use of one's core qualities, in order to contribute to a larger goal. This is a beautiful source of motivation in people.

### 9. Using one's imagination

By calling on their imagination, coachees can be helped to grow more connected with their ideals or desires, and thus with the associated core qualities.

#### *Example 9: Imagine...*

Bianca is invited by her coach to imagine her ideal way of collaborating with her colleagues. She says: 'Oh, that would never happen, there is always drama'. Her coach responds: 'Okay, I get that. But even so, I want to invite you to use your imagination. Imagine that your collaboration with your colleagues is suddenly great. What would that look like? What do you see when you imagine this?'

Bianca: 'Well..., I see that we really support each other, and take on challenges together. We are in tune.' Coach: 'How would that make you feel?'

Bianca: 'Yeah, great, a real feeling of enthusiasm, togetherness, of being connected.'

Coach: 'Which of your qualities would come to the fore in that situation?'

Bianca: 'Uh... enthusiasm,... connection..., a sense of purpose, of goal-directedness...' Bianca is beaming while she is telling this to her coach. The coach confirms that these are beautifully qualities within Bianca. The conversation then turns to the topic of how it would be to use these core qualities more often in the current situation.

People often do not take the time to really examine their ideal and use their imagination in the process. Even so, it is a powerful way to create flow and activate one's core qualities. Coaches can play an important role in this process, and help their coachees to temporarily put aside thoughts such as 'that is impossible' or 'that is not realistic'. This way, coachees can start to feel that there are core qualities inside of them with which they have lost touch. These are often core qualities that help to realize an ideal. If Bianca (from Example 9) were to use her core qualities of enthusiasm, connectedness, and goal-directedness, that could greatly improve the collaboration with her co-workers.

By fantasizing about one's ideal, a purely positive experience is created. Even though this experience is imaginary, its effect is often just as strong as with a positive experience that actually happened. When imagination is used, a different part of the brain becomes active than during logical, analytic thinking, namely the part responsible for processing images and experiences, and their

corresponding associations. This is the same part of the brain that would be active if the situation really took place.

Sometimes, coachees find it difficult to let go of the notion that change is impossible, and thus they won't go along with such a fantasy. As a coach, you can then say something like: 'Imagine that a miracle took place, and the situation would suddenly become ideal. What would that look like?' This way, you can show acceptance for the fact that the coachee thinks the fantasy is unrealistic, but still entice him or her to use their imagination.

You can also use imagination to reinforce previous positive experiences, such as a successful experience that actually happened. In that case, the focus is to help the coachee relive the experience. This way, awareness of the associated feelings, ideals, or core qualities can grow. We used this technique in Exercises 1 and 2 (in Section 2) and in Exercise 5 (in Section 8).

## 10. Key points

We will now summarize the key points of this paper:

1. Core qualities are personal qualities; they are essential in the development of people's psychological capital.
2. It is important to not just be aware of one's core qualities, but to also consciously use them.
3. Core qualities can become clear in a number of ways, such as by receiving feedback from others, reflecting on successes, paying attention to personal contributions/investments, looking at inspiring examples from the present or the past, reflecting on personal values, or filling out a questionnaire.
4. The key differences between core qualities and competencies (skills) are as follows:
  - Competencies can be split into sub competencies; core qualities are indivisible.
  - Competencies can be taught; core qualities are (already) present within the person.
  - Competencies are generally linked with a specific profession; core qualities are versatile.
5. Building on core qualities and positive experiences yields creativity and resilience. This is the central principle of the broaden-and-build model.
6. When people act from their core qualities, it strengthens flow, which is characterized by a perfect balance between one's abilities and the requirements of the situation.
7. There is a close connection between core qualities and ideals (desires).
8. Ideals can be deepened by using imagination. That way, core qualities come to the fore.

## 11. Theoretical foundation

The term core qualities is used by Ofman (2000). He developed an approach in which people can identify not only their core qualities, but also their major challenge, pitfall, and allergy. As such it is a useful tool for development. The unintended disadvantage, however, may be that people often focus mainly on pitfalls and allergies, and less on their core qualities. They can say, for example: 'Enthusiasm is my core quality, but it is also my pitfall!' That puts that core quality in a negative light, which we think is a shame. However, it may be important for a people to develop another core quality *in addition to* enthusiasm, such as sensitivity to the environment or to their own boundaries. By combining enthusiasm and sensitivity, the person's potential becomes even stronger. This way the core quality of enthusiasm does not have to be suppressed, but continues to be seen as a strength, while the arsenal of important core qualities of the person is broadened.

### *Core qualities in positive psychology*

A major project of positive psychology was (and still is) mapping core qualities (*character strengths*). This is intended as a counterpart to existing approaches and psychological manuals that map out

human deficiencies. The first results of this project are summarized in the handbook *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification* by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The authors provide an academic exposition on the core qualities of people, based on an analysis of philosophical, religious, and psychological sources, in which they also looked at the role and meaning of personal qualities in many different countries. An updated version of their research was published by McGrath (2015).

According to Seligman and Peterson (2003), core qualities are expressions of important *values* or *virtues*. Often this concerns values and virtues that are appreciated in many different cultures. They seem to show an essence of what people want to contribute to the world around them.

These authors state that all human beings have core qualities and that these are innate. Due to environmental influences and life experiences, certain core qualities may develop more and others may fade into the background. In the interaction with the environment one can use and further develop potential core qualities, and this will result in better functioning and more happiness.

#### *Characteristics of core qualities*

Peterson and Seligman (2004) describe a number of characteristics of core qualities, the most important of which are:

1. Core qualities are widely recognized as valuable, across cultures. They manifest themselves in stories, myths, legends, symbols, and so on.
2. The use of a core quality contributes to personal fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness.
3. Although a core quality can help to achieve a certain result, every core quality has a moral value in its own right, regardless of any outcome.
4. A core quality is a quality of the *person*, in the sense that there is generality and stability over time. This is visible in the person's way of acting and therefore a core quality can be recognized by others.
5. There are prodigies of core qualities. That is to say, some children exhibit a certain core quality to a very high degree and at an unusually young age.
7. Society has institutions and rituals for cultivating core qualities and for maintaining their application. Some examples: courts for the core quality of justice, churches for the quality of spirituality, awards for people who have shown extreme courage.

#### *Classifications of core qualities*

Peterson and Seligman (2004) organized 24 core qualities into six categories of 'core virtues':

1. Wisdom
2. Courage
3. Humanity
4. Justice
5. Temperance
6. Transcendence

These researchers developed the questionnaire referred to in Section 3, with 240 items helping people to map their own core qualities (see [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)).



There are also other classifications of core qualities, for example the one by Buckingham and Clifton (2001), who distinguish 34 core qualities. Their core qualities only partially overlap with Peterson and Seligman's 24 qualities. Linley et al. (2010) published a list of 60 core qualities. Hence, this is an academic area where currently no general consensus exists.

### *Relations between core qualities and other concepts*

Awareness and use of core qualities strengthen people's psychological capital, a term from positive psychology (Luthans et al., 2007). According to Luthans and his colleagues, aspects of psychological capital are: confidence in one's own abilities (self-efficacy), optimism, hope, and resilience. These four elements lead to positive outcomes for people and organizations.

The use of core qualities correlates with more fulfillment of *basic psychological needs* (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001), the experience of a *calling* (Harzer & Ruch, 2012), more self-confidence and well-being (Wood et al, 2011), less absenteeism (Van Woerkom et al., 2016), and ultimately a process of self-actualization (Kasser, 2002). Certain core qualities have been shown to be closely associated with life satisfaction, namely hope, passion, gratitude, love, and curiosity (Park, et al., 2004). The list of core qualities associated with job satisfaction is rather similar: hope, passion, gratitude, curiosity, and spirituality (Peterson et al., 2010).

### *The step from identifying core qualities to using them*

If someone's core qualities are only identified and named, the positive effect appears to disappear quickly. It is important to *use* core qualities for a certain purpose or ideal. Only then core qualities are being *developed* (Seligman et al., 2005). Experiencing this development also prevents people from considering their core qualities as a fact of life and assuming that they cannot be influenced. Using and developing core qualities strengthen coaches' beliefs in their capacity for growth and in the importance of their own efforts (Louis, 2011). Dweck (2006) calls this process the development of a *growth mindset*.

### *The person in context*

A person always functions in relation to an environment. This insight can be used to identify and further strengthen core qualities. Principles from the *contextual approach* can be used, an approach developed by the American-Hungarian psychiatrist and family therapist Boszormenyi-Nagy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). The term 'context' here refers to a network of meaningful relationships, such as relationships with (grand) parents, brothers, and sisters. Here are some important principles from this approach that help to identify core qualities:

1. The principle of *acknowledging personal investment*. The idea behind this is that by recognizing what you have given or are giving in terms of investment or core qualities in a situation, an increasing sense of self-worth arises. Realizing that you matter to others, and that you are seen and appreciated, gives confidence. See Example 4.
2. The principle of *finding and recognizing resources*. This may concern resources from the current context or from the past, such as the family of origin. See situations a and b in Example 5.
3. The principle of a *balance between giving and receiving (a balance of fairness)*. Giving and receiving refers to a natural exchange between people, in which core qualities play an important role. People feel the need for giving and receiving to be in balance (see Example 2). It is therefore important to use core qualities in such a way that there is this balance, keeping an eye on the role or responsibility you have.
4. The principle of *loyalties*. Loyalty means staying true and committed to people with whom one has (had) an important relationship. A strong form of loyalty is that of children to their parents (and vice versa) because of their biological connection. An example of loyalty is being faithful to values and core qualities inherited from parents or other important people. See Example 6.

### *The system approach*

Related to the contextual approach is the *system approach*, which is best known through the work of Hellinger. Hellinger et al. (1998) describe that in every system (for example a family, team, or organization) three system laws apply, which are based on age-old and universal principles. If these

laws are complied with, people can flourish. The three laws are:

1. *The law of belonging.* Everyone who is part of the system is entitled to a place and belongs to the system. In families, teams, or learning groups it is therefore important that no one is left out.
2. *The law of sacred order.* Everyone (for example in an organization) takes up his or her place, with the appropriate role and responsibility. In a family this means that each parent takes the role and responsibility of a parent, and in a team that the team leader takes the responsibility of a leader.
3. *The law of balance between giving and receiving,* which we already encountered above, in the contextual approach. Giving and receiving are part of the natural exchange between people. These two aspects must be in a reasonable balance. In an organization, this applies to the people who work there as well as to relationships with the environment (for example with customers).

If one of the laws is not complied with, this often creates both an obstacle in the total system (for example insufficient structure) and an obstacle in the individuals who are part of the system (leading to ineffective behavior). By restoring the natural dynamics of the system, core qualities can come to light that were previously hidden. We will now give an example with regard to the second law. A team leader did not take the responsibility to show his team a clear goal to strive for. He did not really take the lead, causing a lack of cohesion in the team and stagnation in the work processes. Coaching helped him take the responsibility associated with his leadership role. This brought his core qualities decisiveness and clarity to the fore, which had a positive effect on the team.

The systemic approach has various working methods, including working with 'constellations' in which group members or symbols are arranged in space (Hellinger, 2003). These represent parts of a family, organization, team, or another intrapersonal force field. Subsequently, the representatives may start moving in response to this force field and a natural recovery of a blocked dynamic can then become visible and tangible.

A point of attention in the systemic perspective is that - in the form introduced by Hellinger - it relies heavily on the psychoanalytic tradition, with its emphasis on trauma and painful experiences. Although attention to these issues should not be avoided, a strength-oriented approach in working with constellations is aimed at raising awareness of ideals and core qualities (aspects that can also be given a place in the constellation). The coachee in the constellation is helped to physically experience a newly discovered strength more deeply and to feel that from now on he or she can tune in to it more.

We wish to emphasize that the details of how to work with strength-oriented constellations are beyond the scope of this paper.

### *The concept of competencies*

The term competencies is widely used in the literature on professional development, but it is actually a rather unclear concept that can be defined in many different ways (Mulder, Weigel, & Collins, 2006). Some definitions of the concept are quite broad, and seem "to be used as an umbrella term to cover almost anything that might directly or indirectly influence job performance" (Woodruffe, 1993, p. 29). From this perspective, core qualities could be seen as competencies, but that makes the area rather confusing.

We find it important to distinguish competencies from core qualities. Therefore, we follow Woodruffe (1993), who clearly limits the concept of competencies and defines them as *behavioral patterns*. This means that a competency becomes similar to a skill. We feel this clarifies the difference between competencies and core qualities and also makes it easier to see how personal and professional aspects intertwine.

As several researchers have noted, there are serious problems with the emphasis on competencies and the use of lists of competencies. Is it really true that a strong professional is someone who



meets a general list of competencies? What about the individuality of the professional, his or her uniqueness as a person? For example, Palmer (1998, p. 10) states: "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher". Here we encounter a tension that is very old and keeps reappearing in publications about professionalism, namely the tension between the more personal and the technical-instrumental side of professional functioning. Our view is that it is not one side or the other that is important, but both. Professional behavior is about the integration of technical, traditional, and personal aspects: good professionals have the necessary skills to work on their personal goals or ideals, while also utilizing their own core qualities, which give a personal color to the skills.

#### *Positive and negative emotions*

It has been shown that positive experiences and the positive emotions they evoke (for example through awareness of core qualities) are effective for learning and developmental processes. This is the premise of the *broaden-and-build model* described by Fredrickson (2002), one of the foremost psychologists in positive psychology. This premise says that positive emotions enhance people's strength, broaden their perception, promote learning and cognitive performance, and build important psychological buffers providing resilience (Garland et al., 2010; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). The broadening of a coachee's awareness is important for finding truly new approaches, from a broader frame of mind. Positive emotions play an important role in this process: they lead to more emotional space in consciousness (Losada & Heaphy, 2004, p. 744) and a broadening of the thought-action repertoire (Fredrickson, 2009).

According to Fredrickson, the top ten positive emotions are joy, love, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, and awe.

A focus on problems leads to negative emotions and thus to a narrowing of thinking. Fredrickson and Losada (2005) published a study that would show that the optimal ratio between positive and negative emotions is 3:1, but this has since been thoroughly criticized (Brown et al., 2013). Fredrickson (2013a) has recognized that this criticism is justified, but argues that the idea remains firmly in place that for growth, people need more positive than negative experiences. However, the optimal relationship between positive and negative experiences will depend on the person, the circumstances, and the relationship between the coach and the coachee.

#### *Ideals*

It is striking that little research has been done into ideals, although there are many publications on related concepts such as values, motivation, life goals, mission, passion, enthusiasm, and hope. An exception are studies on teachers, where the theme of ideals does receive attention (for example Hammerness, 2006; Hansen, 2001; Kole & De Ruyter, 2010).

According to Seligman (2011), the conscious pursuit of one's life goals contributes to meaning and well-being. However, people (often unconsciously) adopt ideals from their environment (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which means there is conditioning regarding ideals. (Consider, for example, the influence of advertising.) This may give a superficial sense of fulfillment, but does not actually lead to a fundamental fulfillment of basic human needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002). That is why an important point of attention in coaching is: what are goals or ideals that arise from within the person?

#### *The power of imagination*

With the will, people can evoke images and ideas, which in turn evoke feelings (Assagioli, 2010). The conscious use of imagination is important because research by Pham and Taylor (1999) showed that imagination evokes the same effects in our brain as actually being in the imagined situation. Working with imagination creates neurological pathways in the brain, increasing the likelihood that the ideal

will be achieved (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006; Kosslyn et al., 2006). This approach is called *mental simulation* (Szpunar et al., 2014).

A special form of mental simulation is the use of the 'miracle question' from the solution-focused approach. The coach asks the coachee to imagine that a miracle took place and that his or her problem has suddenly disappeared. The coach can then continue by asking further questions, such as: what would that look like? How would the coachee feel then? Which core qualities would then come to life within the coachee?

Another powerful way to stimulate imagination is the use of pictures, photos, and cards with images (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2019). Think of postcards, tarot cards, or other cards that are on the market specifically for this purpose.

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