

## *Values-Based Coaching as a Method of Supporting Professional Identity*

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to present values-based coaching in the context of its usefulness in supporting professional identity. It investigates the construct of professional identity from both individual and organizational perspectives, outlining key theories and stages of its development. It describes the main assumptions of coaching and models of working with clients that can be used to support professional identification. The text highlights the importance of values in shaping professional identity and as a central part of the coaching process. Furthermore, the article delineates the benefits of nurturing professional identity, highlighting its positive implications for both employees and the organizations they serve.

**KEYWORDS:** *coaching; values; professional identity; job satisfaction; professional role*

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## INTRODUCTION

Currently, in an era of conditions enabling the fulfillment of key human needs and in a world of diverse opportunities and development paths, developing employees' professional identity can become a significant challenge. Self-fulfillment at work is becoming increasingly important for individuals (Silva Sousa & Colauto, 2021). Instead of external motivators such as remuneration or fringe benefits (which are standard in many companies), employee engagement and satisfaction, as well as a sense of realizing one's potential, needs, and values in the workplace, are becoming more important for employee satisfaction and effectiveness. Developing professional identity is crucial here, as it translates into employee engagement and productivity, as well as greater motivation to work and develop (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). On the other hand, the contemporary labor market is characterized by growing employment instability, the prevalence of project-based work, the growing importance of remote work, and process automation. In an environment of constant change – both technological and organizational – employees are increasingly experiencing professional identity crises. As a result, traditional career paths based on stability and predictability are being eroded (see Mussagulova et al., 2023).

Professional identity development not only determines an individual's functioning within an organization but also influences their psychological well-being, motivation, and job satisfaction (Toubassi et al., 2023). Therefore, the issues addressed are important for understanding employee adaptation, engagement, and burnout (Yulia et al., 2025).

The aim of this article is to discuss values-based coaching as a method that can support an individual's professional identity. An important aspect highlighted in the text is the concept of professional identity development and the levels of its formation. Next, the basic assumptions of coaching will be discussed, along

with the application of coaching tools to professional identity formation. The article will also present the benefits of identity strengthening – both for the individual and the organization.

## PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Professional activity is a crucial component of adult functioning, playing a key role both individually and socially. Work has a significant impact on a person's life, largely determining their social standing. An individual's professional identity involves identifying with the principles, skills, and attributes of a given profession, as well as with the values it embodies (Crocetti et al., 2008; Cruess et al., 2015). It constitutes an important area of professional functioning. A developed professional identity translates into their commitment to work and career, and thus also influences their effectiveness and quality of work (Greco et al., 2022; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

Both psychological and social perspectives are important for the development of professional identity (Santivasi et al., 2022). Internalization with the characteristics, norms, and values of one's profession makes an individual with a developed professional identity feel like a member of a given professional group, thinking, and acting in a manner characteristic of that profession (Cruess et al., 2014). From a psychological perspective, an individual adapts to their role and can develop within it, satisfying their needs for belonging, competence, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). They also perceive meaning in their work. A developed professional identity also has a positive impact on psychological well-being and job satisfaction (Bednarek, 2023). Professional identity enables individuals to express their personality traits, utilize their talents, and realize their values (Sokołowska et al., 2017). As professional identity develops, individuals develop a self-concept, incorporating professional experiences into it.

At the societal level, a person is socialized to fulfill their role and interact with others (Cruess et al., 2015). The development of professional identity is a highly individual process (Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2021).

Professional identity is a component of both a individual's personal identity (Hirschi, 2012) and social identity (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). Personal identity is related to the perception of oneself as a distinct entity (Fitzgerald, 2020). It comprises both self-knowledge (understanding oneself, describing oneself), a sense of self-agency, and a sense of self-worth. Individuals also identify with the social roles they fulfill, which gives them a social identity. Wenger (1999) argues that a person's identity is their "way of being in the world" and is associated with a sense of appreciation in a given role, as well as a sense of belonging to a given group or community. Individual identities combine knowledge and skills from various areas of life and translate into their way of functioning, and coping. From a societal perspective, professional identity positively influences a sense of responsibility in their profession and facilitates collaboration between representatives of different professions (Mak et al., 2022). Identification with the professional environment and the professional role they fulfill promotes more effective task performance (Greco et al., 2022). According to Ashforth and colleagues (2008), professional identity is an element of self-awareness and is associated with both the perception and experience of belonging to a given professional group.

## FORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Obtaining professional education, or even starting a job, does not always entail developing a professional identity (Ashforth et al., 2013). Its formation is a process. Among the factors shaping professional identity, researchers (Tan et al., 2017) list self-efficacy,

professional experience (and how the individual perceives it), the availability of professional role models, and a preference for the job. Research (Jang et al., 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2003) has shown that identifying with the meaning of our activity and experiencing autonomy enable us to experience positive affect, cope with challenges more effectively, and be more motivated.

Ashforth et al. (2008) proposed an interesting concept of professional identity development. According to these authors, it develops at three levels: 1) the external level, i.e., behaviors related to performing professional activities; 2) the level of values, beliefs, and skills; 3) the level of identity and meaning. By analyzing these areas in an individual, one can describe their identification with their profession. The described model provides guidance on which areas to support in forming their professional identity. It describes which levels of functioning should be considered and strengthened to develop it.

Marcia (1966) presents a different approach to identity development. Drawing on Erikson's theory, he distinguished two stages of identity formation. The first is exploration, and the second is individual commitment. Exploration is broadly defined as understanding the environment, relationships, other people's expectations, opportunities, and threats. It also involves identifying one's resources. Commitment, on the other hand, is related to the process of making decisions about oneself and taking responsibility for one's actions. Other researchers (Crocetti et al., 2008) have expanded this concept to include a third stage of identity development: revision of commitment. This involves verifying whether the decisions made are still satisfactory. If they do not meet the individual's expectations, the individual re-explores to change their commitment. This is associated with the possibility of an identity crisis, for example, in the professional sphere, but it is developmental for the individual because they confront their own choices with their needs, preferences, values, and level of

life satisfaction. Therefore, they can re-explore their environment and review their resources to find an alternative.

A similar approach to developing professional identity was proposed by Luyckx et al. (2011). According to their concept, individuals make professional choices based on their expectations and perceptions of a given job. While performing the job, they confront their aspirations, needs, and values with the actual possibilities of achieving them. After such a recognition, they can either remain in their chosen profession (identification with the profession) or return to the exploration phase. An interesting phenomenon is when work is a way to acquire the resources needed to fulfill their values, but it does not fulfill them in itself. An individual may respect existing norms, but most often fails to develop a professional identity or identifies only partially with their professional role. The consistency of human values with the values implemented at work is therefore an important aspect of supporting the professional identity of employees, and thus their psychological well-being, job satisfaction and their effectiveness in performing tasks.

#### VALUES AS A FOUNDATION FOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

Values help determine a person's orientation in life, including professional work. They are associated with giving meaning and identifying one's own needs (Ostrowska, 2004). Values play an important role in regulating behavior and guiding one's actions and motivation (Łubianka & Sękowski, 2016). Values are defined as a person's beliefs about what is important and worth achieving. Individuals derive satisfaction and joy from their fulfillment and perceive meaning in them. From a developmental perspective, values are the foundation of human activity (Przetacznik-Gierowska, 2011).

Values are an important component of an individual's identity. Importantly, they connect a person's beliefs with their actions. An individual who pursues their values demonstrates a willingness to act consistent with their beliefs and experiences (Fishbach, 2009).

Values in leadership and various areas of employee functioning within organizations are gaining increasing attention (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010; Lønning, 2015). This is thanks to the growing awareness of people who increasingly prioritize finding meaning in what they do and who don't want their work to be merely superficial performance of tasks (Stacy, 2012). Awareness of values and their implementation in professional responsibilities give meaning to the work performed. This is associated with both greater employee engagement and a sense of responsibility for what they do.

## VALUES-BASED COACHING

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate how coaching can help shape professional identity. Coaching is a form of support focused on developing employee competencies, which ultimately translates into increased performance, improved professional functioning, and goal achievement (Wiginton & Cartwright, 2020). Coaching utilizes methods that address an individual's beliefs, values, emotions, and behaviors to help them achieve their goals (Horvath et al., 2024). The essence of coaching is to unearth an individual's potential and work with their resources, which are treated as the foundation for implementing desired transformations (Whitmore, 2011). The coach serves as a partner supporting the learner in achieving goals, solving problems, expanding self-awareness, and gaining knowledge and development. Working with the goal and focusing on improving professional competencies and achieving greater job

satisfaction can also impact the employee's personal life, and vice versa (Flanagan, 2013).

Coaching encompasses many approaches and specializations in working with clients. One approach is values-based coaching (Stelter, 2014), which places them at the center of working with the client. Values generally hold significant importance in coaching, as coaching is considered a self-reflective process (Rogers, 2010). A values-based approach particularly emphasizes their role in the client's life. The goals of the process can be related to both personal changes and professional development, such as preparing for leadership or strengthening collaboration. However, the process isn't about focusing on a goal. The coach and the client focus on core values, which serve as a guide or orientation point for their life or career (Stelter, 2014). In summary, values-based coaching is an approach in which the coach helps the client identify and understand their fundamental values, and then align their actions and decisions with them to achieve greater life satisfaction. It is a developmental process that focuses on self-awareness and aligning actions with personal beliefs and priorities.

#### SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH VALUES-BASED COACHING

Identity development is inextricably linked to an individual's reflection on themselves, their place in the environment, their relationships, and the fulfillment of their needs and values. As mentioned, coaching is a method of work based largely on self-reflection, where the client pauses to think, analyze, and explore what is important and necessary to them (see Whitmore, 2011).

Values-based coaching helps employees identify, name, and understand their key values, which they want to pursue in their personal and professional lives. This allows them to better understand what truly motivates them, make more informed career

choices, and avoid actions that contradict their own value system, reducing the risk of burnout (Fainstad et al., 2022; Tańska, 2022). Coaching also allows them to identify values that are supported by their professional responsibilities. Capturing consistency between what's important to the client and the ability to fulfill their needs and values at work is crucial for developing a professional identity (Poole & Patterson 2021). When professional activities align with personal values, employees experience a greater sense of meaning and satisfaction in their work and become more authentic and trustworthy in interactions with others.

The basic tools of coaching, such as asking questions, active listening, and reflecting (Rogers, 2010; Whitmore, 2011), are the foundation for working with individuals. Deepening questions (e.g., *Why am I doing this? What purpose does it serve? What is its significance? What is most important?*) open up opportunities for insight, exploration, and reflection for the client. During the session, the coach also reflects on the emotions, needs, beliefs, and values they hear at a deeper level in the client's statements. Reflecting plays a crucial role in deepening the client's understanding and allows them to become aware of what is important, what underlies their actions and emotions (Rogers, 2010). It facilitates deeper exploration. As mentioned earlier, this exploration is key in the concepts of professional identity development (Ashforth et al., 2008; Crocetti et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2011).

Many models and tools are used in coaching. One of the most popular is the GROW model (Rogers, 2010), which consists of the following stages: (1) general aim – the client setting a goal; (2) reality – identifying the situation, what constitutes a problem, and what constitutes an individual's resources; (3) options – the search for opportunities; and (4) will – a commitment to action, real commitment. According to the concept of identity development (Crocetti et al., 2008; Marcia, 1966) discussed in this article, there are three stages of identity formation: exploration (examination of reality and one's own resources), commitment (decision and

taking responsibility), and revision (verification of commitment). The GROW model can be applied to these stages of professional identity development. In identity formation, the individual explores (explores the environment and one's own resources, identifies various options) and makes a decision (commitment to action). Revision of commitment can also be supported by exploring reality (*What is it like? How are the individual's needs and values met in a given professional role?*) and searching for new options.

Another interesting tool used in values coaching is the use of Dilts's neurological levels (Grimley, 2010). According to this concept, a person's actions, motivation, and ability to cope with difficulties depend on several levels of functioning. Dilts arranged these levels in a pyramid: environment, behaviors, skills, beliefs and values, identity, and meaning. In values coaching, the client reflects on each level. In the context of professional functioning, this is a useful tool for examining their motivation to work, the difficulties they experience, and their development in a given professional role. Moving through the levels, the client analyzes the environment in which they work (e.g., *What is favorable about it? What is it like? What are the challenges?*), their behaviors (*What do I do? How do I perform my work? What do I need to change in my actions?*), their skills (*How do I utilize my potential at work? What more do I want to learn?*), values (*What is important to me? What do I want to accomplish in this work? Why am I doing it?*), identity (*Who am I? Who am I becoming in my work?*), and meaning (*What is the significance of what I do for my life or the lives of others?*). Analyzing the individual levels of Dilts' pyramid allows for a deeper exploration of professional identity development. It leads the client to conclusions about their role fit and allows them to identify commonalities between their work and the individual's needs and values. Using Dilts' pyramid is directly related to strengthening the levels of professional identity formation as conceptualized by Ashforth and colleagues (2008).

Value-based decision-making is also an important aspect. In situations of uncertainty or professional dilemmas, values serve as a compass that helps to make decisions consistent with professional identity (Lichtenstein et al., 2017), strengthens the sense of integrity and self-confidence, facilitates the development of the role of an expert or leader (Kane et al., 2021). Value-based coaching helps to formulate professional goals that are more sustainable and long-term, supports professional development in line with “who I am,” and leads to greater commitment and perseverance (Griffiths, 2010).

## SUMMARY

Coaching promotes both specific, observable behavioral changes and allows the client to achieve deeper transformation. Supporting professional identity, on the one hand, allows for a noticeable increase in employee effectiveness and engagement. On the other hand, identification with one’s profession translates into greater job satisfaction. Identification with one’s profession, with the tasks within it, and a sense of fulfilling one’s values at work influence not only job satisfaction (Bednarek, 2023) but also life satisfaction (Denkiewicz-Kuczewska, 2012). Satisfactory fulfillment of one role, in turn, fosters the fulfillment of other life roles in which the individual is engaged (Lachowska, 2012). Coaching, therefore, allows for the achievement of the organization’s business goals, as well as the employee’s personal goals (Tyszkiewicz, 2020).

Many people experience a disconnect between who they are personally and who they need to be professionally. Values coaching helps deepen professional identity in a way that aligns with personality and beliefs, better integrates various life roles, and thus reduces stress and increases life satisfaction (cf. Lachowska, 2012). Values-based coaching can provide effective support for individuals experiencing broadly defined professional change:

job change, promotion, burnout, or a crisis of meaning (Grant, 2014). Values can provide a stable point of reference that helps individuals rediscover their professional role and promotes the redefinition of professional identity.

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